10-28-2011

Writing my Fragmented Self, Writing its Memory (ies)

Iman Humaydan

Panel: Why I Write The Way I Do

Iman HUMAYDAN

Writing my Fragmented Self, Writing its Memory (ies)

It is not easy to write about writing. As Marguerite Duras once said, one must be stronger than her writing in order to be able to write. When it comes to talking about writing, I think it is more than that: one must be stronger than herself to talk about writing.

Starting to write at a very young age and thinking that it was intimate and personal, made me think during years of my early adolescence that what I was doing was "pre-writing." It is the outer world that drags you out of yourself by telling you, "Hey, this is not intimate and personal, it happened with us, too! Your writing is universal; it is human."

In 1975, I burned my early writings, along with many intimate and personal things: letters, postcards, and notes. It was the beginning of the civil war in my country, and members of my family who were living here in the US succeeded in getting me an American visa. At that time, I also had to leave my house for security reasons. I burned all my notebooks; I burned them all, as if I was preparing myself for a new life in the USA. But life always has its surprises: I did not migrate. I stayed in my country, Lebanon, and I kept on writing, but I stopped burning my writings. I do not know what exactly happened that changed my mind and made me stay. Most probably it was because of my change of residence from my mountain village to Beirut. There, in the city, I met many persons who became friends for life, and who were committed to stay in the country. One of them became my husband. The direct reason for my staying in Beirut and not migrating is not important to me any more. What is important is that, from that moment, I knew very well that what I write is not only about me but about others, too, about people and places and about memory.

The civil war in Lebanon became tenser, violence prevailed all over the country, and my life was reduced to mere survival. I moved many times, and with each displacement I lost papers I had written on. However, I wrote more stories and gained more experience. It was not until 1989 that I first published one of my short stories. At that time I had to flee the country and travel with my two kids to Cyprus. I was pregnant with my third child. I was so anxious and afraid of staying in Lebanon and, at the same time, of traveling abroad. Though Cyprus provided my family a safer place, it increased my anxiety and fear. The reason was nothing but being away from people I love. Not knowing what would happen and what our future would be. Writing was meant to ease my anxiety. With every word I wrote, I felt that anxiety become less. Besides, writing and publishing what I wrote was the only way to communicate with my country and with the rest of my family in Lebanon. Writing at that moment became my only tool to bridge with the beloved other, to collect my fragmented self between Lebanon, Cyprus and the USA.

I never knew I was writing a novel while writing *B as in Beirut*, my first novel. For me, it was exactly an attempt to gather up my fragmented self, I who

moved thirteen times during the civil war. During the war, Beirut was divided into two parts, and I had to cross the city in order to visit my husband's family and some of my friends. Though it was a dangerous thing to do, crossing the demarcation line was my daily exercise of facing the war, of saying *no* to violence, fragmentation and division. I wrote about this experience. Most often I wrote while waiting in my car on the demarcation line for hours, waiting for the militia men to allow me to cross.

These writings took a long time to become a novel. Similar to my life, they were scattered in the different houses I moved into. I left some of them in my summerhouse and my family's house where I sometimes went with my children for shelter. The war ended, and the city was unified again, and I had an instant need to bring those writings all together, to gather my fragmented self the same way my country was gathered. This is how *B as in Beirut* was born. It was born from my scattered writings, from painful stories on the crossroads, from stories of women whose dreams were shattered by the violent war. Those women told their stories and persisted in pursuing their dreams despite pain. These are my women; they are me. I wrote *B as in Beirut* thinking that I was writing my pain, that I was extracting this pain from myself and putting it on paper, extracting the violence that war did to me and to my mind and state of being. But when the novel was published, I discovered that it was received as the voice of women, of all women who witnessed the Lebanese civil war. It sounds strange to those who write a novel in the classic chronological way, to say that when *B as in Beirut* came out, I discovered excerpts of a long chapter left behind in my summerhouse. I forgot to add them to the novel.

B as in Beirut was my novelistic debut and lead to writing *Wild Mulberries* a few years later, during which I went back to the university to work on war memory.

It is amazing how my creative writing interrelates with my academic writing and research. Why do I write what I am writing? It is a difficult question but the answer is more difficult. Writing a novel on women in war lead me to a more elaborate work: narratives of women in war, whose family members had disappeared, who didn't know whether they were dead or alive. Though it was research, with a different approach through fieldwork and scientific discipline, it helped me in writing *Wild Mulberries*. The main character in *Wild Mulberries* is a young woman searching for her missing mother. The horizon is wide open when we write, whether it is a novel or research. In writing, we render visible our humanity and that of others. In this novel a great place was given to minorities and people whom I no longer see together: Kurds, Armenians, Shiites, and British who used to live in a village near my home village. Writing is an attempt to reread myself, too, and my collective memory.

Writing on memory is writing about the lives of people and of places. Therefore, it was no coincidence that I named my third novel *Other Lives*. These are the different strata of life one goes through. Our life is constituted of these many layers that shape us and form the way we are. My family, for instance, is Druze, a group that believes in reincarnation. When I was a child, the idea of reincarnation saved me from a lot of fear, fear from death and from

the unknown, or the imagined "nothingness" after death. For so many years of my adult life, I suppressed this idea that is strongly embedded within Druze belief and culture. Later, I figured how the idea of reincarnation was present in me as a writer, and how it took on a different meaning and sense. I am not a believer, but the idea of reincarnation is often repeated in my writings. It helped me to form a certain vision of the world and of my life. With time, I developed a new approach to this idea, as if I were to reconcile with my community's culture without merging with it. Reincarnation, the way I perceive it, occurs at every moment in our life. We do not need to die to be reincarnated. Writing is a continuous reincarnation as well. In this sense, I have many lives, not just one. Writing gives us this ambiguous, yet serene, feeling of living many lives at any given time. From there follows the question of the multiplicity of identities and their formation.

In writing, I am the woman who came from Armenia in 1921, chased by the Turkish army on the port of Smerna (Izmir). I am the woman whose son disappeared and who has waited for him for twenty-six years, I am the young woman whose mother fled their home, running from a tyrannical husband. I am the Kurdish woman who does not understand why people buy and consume so much when she works merely to live. In *Other Lives*, there is the mother who becomes silent as a result of violence and whose voice was muted by the religious and patriarchal pressures on her. She found silence the best tool for saying *no*. We reconcile with the past in order to find a better future. I go back to what Marguerite Duras said; in order to write, we must be stronger than our writing. This is exactly what I think of now when I write and return to war memories: I must be stronger than these memories, and I must make the best of them as a creative writer and a novelist.

The war has destroyed places of our childhood, the reference places of our memory. It is fearful to face all that emptiness. At such moments there is not much one can do to retrieve those places except through art and literature. This is what writing is sometimes: retrieving lost places.

War did not only destroy personal lives and places, but also social cohesion and social diversity. What was left of the Jewish community in Lebanon went away, as did a large number of Palestinians, but also Armenians and Kurds, not to mention the internal displacement that occurred and segregated the population according to religion or sect. I needed to tell all those stories, stories of prewar, to tell them first to myself, to make them a cherished memory, and to tell them to others. I never thought of great literature; I did not care for great novels. What I cared for was my story, my memory and the memories of those around me who were such a great inspiration in accepting to share them with me.